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ABSTRACT

Since good prose is usually prose that has been carefully edited, devoting a significant portion of class time to editing should improve the writing and attitudes toward writing of college students in expository writing classes. By requiring students to edit their essays in class, writing teachers force the students to break their writing into a series of steps and to realize that writing is a process. One method of working the editing process into classroom activities is to have students meet in groups of three during the week before essays are due and have them edit each other's work. Preparing students to edit essays in this manner requires both individualized and group instruction in how to work with others and how to read essays critically. This information is provided by the teacher through lectures, drills, and homework interspersed with editing activities throughout the semester. In this way, students will initially edit papers for only those techniques that have previously been covered in class. As the semester goes on, they will acquire more expertise in editing until they have learned all the essential editing skills. An alternative to interspersing instruction with editing is to spend the first part of the semester instructing and the last part editing. Both schedules have been successfully applied. (A sample editing checklist for use by students is attached.) (RI)

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Essay Editing: Helping Students Teach Themselves

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As every college composition teacher knows, most college composition students assume certain truths to be self-evident: nobody learns anything in comp courses; comp courses are "dumb" requirements to be fulfilled as expeditiously, and with as little effort, as possible; passing or failing a comp course depends entirely on whether or not the teacher likes the style and content of the essays.

As untrue as these assumptions may be, they are realities with which we have worked every semester–usually as soon as we give out the first grades and are confronted with: "I don't see how I could get a D on this essay when I have a 3.8 GPA." "This class is a boring waste of my time. I know what I'm saying in this paper and so do all my friends." And, to a great extent, the success or failure of our classes depended on how well we convinced our students that everything they had heard and assumed about comp classes–and comp teachers–all these years just wasn't so. We realized that our main task was to convince them that communication involves more than having a few friends tell them that their English paper sounds okay; that it involves making others, even English teachers, understand what they are trying to express. And we wanted to convince them that they can learn to communicate in writing to a wide audience, skillfully and confidently, in just one semester.

Of course, we knew what we needed to do. The question was how to do it. How, with three, four, or five classes, each having 25 to 30 students with writing skills ranging from basic to very good, could we convince even ourselves, much less the students, that they could become good writers in a semester? Even if we assumed they listened to every word we uttered about thesis statements, topic sentences, coherence and run-together sentences, even if we knew they were doing every exercise on completing a sentence with the appropriate word or phrase, how could we possibly critique enough of the students' writing to let them know how well they were communicating in writing and what they might do to improve?

While teaching at San Francisco State University, we devised and refined a method of teaching composition that not only overcomes the odds against students' learning to write in a semester, but also makes teaching composition less the drudgery of wading through a mountain of hastily scribbled, thoughtless papers, and more the satisfaction of showing people how to use writing to communicate. We teach students to edit their own and their classmates' papers, and as they become good editors–making decisions on how themes might be effectively developed, paragraphs organized, and sentences constructed to carry the logic smoothly–they teach themselves to write.

The Theory

As writing teachers we know that good prose is, more often than not, carefully edited prose, and in good faith we share this with our students. But we also know that our advice often goes unheeded even by the most diligent students. Some students just don't believe that revising their essays will make a difference; others don't have time to find out. Devoting a significant portion of class time to editing overcomes these barriers.

By requiring the students to edit their essays in class, we force them to break their writing into a series of steps. They complete a draft a week before it is due, look at it with their classmates, then rewrite it, thereby seeing that writing an essay is a process, not a frenetic scribbling 20 minutes before class. They begin to realize that the frenetic scribbling has its place: it's the first step, the getting thoughts on paper. Once they have some thoughts on paper, students can understand that the written word is rarely chiseled in stone, that thoughts can be revised and refined, and weak prose transformed into strong prose. Finally, by working in groups, students encounter an audience, often for the first time, and see that they are indeed writing to someone who cannot be satisfied with intended meaning and tepid style, who will settle for nothing less than prose written by someone, prose in which content and context work together to clearly present the writer and his ideas.

The Method

The editing process itself is simple. During the week before essays are due, students use class sessions to edit rough drafts of their essays. Working in groups of three, they spend about 50 minutes on each group member's paper, while we step out of our roles as leaders to become resource persons, answering questions, settling disputes, supporting the groups in the editing process.

On editing days, students bring to class four copies of an essay draft (one copy for each member of their group and one for the teacher to use to compare to the final draft). The students are given an Editing Checklist[1] to guide their considerations about an essay, which leads them to deal first with essay development and organization, then with the issues within the paragraphs and sentences. In their groups, the students focus on one essay at a time, writing relevant comments on the draft, as well as asking questions of and offering suggestions to the writer of the essay. Once an essay has been edited by the group, the writers use the criticism as they deem appropriate to develop the final version of their essay, which they hand in the following week.[2]

We evaluate each student's final version just as we would any essay, edited or not. But we also compare the final to the pre-edited draft, in order to note how effective each editing group has been and to keep track of each student's effort and improvement from draft to draft and paper to paper.

The Preparation

As we've said, student needs are fairly obvious, and the editing process fairly simple. What is perhaps <u>not</u> so obvious or simple is the preparation needed to ensure that students will approach editing feeling comfortable and confident about giving and accepting criticism.

For the sake of clarity, we have divided our methods of preparation into two categories: what we do with each student to prepare him/her for editing, and what we do with the class as a whole.

We have found it extremely valuable to meet with students individually during the first few weeks of school, asking them about their past experiences with and preconceived notions about writing and how they feel about having their writing read and edited by their peers. By listening to what students think about peer evaluation, we are not only able to break down a certain amount of student anxiety and hostility, but also learn how editing might suit individual assumptions and needs.

We have also found it valuable, schedule permitting, to work with students in conference to evaluate or "grade" their essays. In these conferences, we try to get the students to evaluate their writing before we evaluate it ourselves. By being initially passive in these conferences, we can provide a "safe" environment for the students to discuss their feelings about their writing and the ways by which they could improve it. As the trusted "authority" in these matters, we can praise the students for having come up with strategies to improve the writing, point out to them that they are indeed acquiring the necessary critical tools of an editor, and encourage them to trust their own instincts as writers, which they finally must do.

Preparation of the whole class for editing begins during the second class period, as soon as the paper work of the new term is out of the way. We spend that class letting students become acquainted so that they can view the peer criticism they will eventually receive as coming from well-intentioned friends rather than "bonehead" English classmates out to do who-knows-what damage.

There are many ways of accomplishing these introductions. One we have found successful involves a game in which the class divides into groups of three. Within each group, one student assumes the role of "talker," another the role of "listener," and the third the role of "observer." For five minutes, the talker talks about his interests, major, whatever, while the listener listens and asks questions and the observer observes and offers clarification of what is being said and asked. At the end of five minutes, the students change roles–someone else talks, listens and observes–and at the end of another five minutes, the students change roles one last time. After fifteen minutes, when everyone has assumed each

role, the class comes together again, and each listener introduces to the class the talker he listened to. The talker is not allowed to elaborate upon the listener's comments, and the results are always revealing: students receive their first impression of just how successfully they are communicating. They also relax and learn a bit about each other.

We follow this game with much more group work. Students construct paragraphs in groups, work on drills in groups, and write descriptive passages in groups, so that they become comfortable with each other and work together effectively.

Certainly as important as working well together is having information on which to base criticism of an essay. We provide students with that information through lectures, drills, and homework assignments designed to teach them everything they need to know to answer the questions on the Editing Checklist.[1] As they edit each other's work, they are required only to address the concerns we've discussed in class (although they may address others if they feel confident enough about doing so). Thus, if we intersperse editing with lectures and drill throughout the semester, students will initially edit papers for only those techniques we have covered in class up to the first editing session. By the last editing session, of course, they will be able to address all the questions on the Checklist. (An alternative to interspersing instruction with editing is to spend the first part of the semester instructing and the last part editing. We have found both approaches successful.)

Before we have students edit each other's writing, we have them edit professional prose models. This is a common technique and we use it, as many teachers do, to illustrate the writing principle we are studying. However, we use these models to introduce rather than reinforce the lesson so that the students can discover the principle and define it for themselves. By learning to articulate opinions within a group, students gain the confidence needed to justify how they think a particular piece works in their editing groups. Also, by learning that even professional prose can be criticized, students become critical readers. Furthermore, through group interaction, students learn that there can be two intelligent yet opposing reactions to a piece of writing–knowledge important to

the editing process because there may obviously be differing views about someone's essay yet no purpose in spending time winning arguments. Instead, the students realize that it's best to clarify their views and leave the final decision to the writer himself. Perhaps most important, discussions about a piece of prose let us again step out of our authority role and encourage the students to take themselves seriously as critics of writing.

Finally, before the first editing session, and again before several later sessions, we use the Editing Checklist[1] to edit a student essay (usually one saved from the previous semester) with the entire class. We do this for several reasons: first, to remind the students how to use the Checklist; second, to review the lessons incorporated into the Checklist; third, to illustrate that an essay which is "okay" can still be improved; and fourth, to show the students that questioning another's prose is not only a reader's right but an editor's responsibility. Invariably these class editing times raise the students' expectations of themselves and their classmates' writing. Rather than continuing to view good writing as an elusive art, the students see that, as editors, they can present their ideas so specifically that they are genuinely interesting and informative, and thereby produce an essay that has a beginning, middle and end, with grammatically correct and pleasing sentences that enhance the reader's understanding of the thought.

We have emphasized preparing students to both give and accept criticism, but their giving criticism is by far the most important. A student is not to sit by and passively observe the other two members of the editing group improve his/her essay; rather, he/she is to actively participate in the editing of his/her own and others' essays, using the writing concepts discussed in class to make every group member's essay successful. The students are very much editors during this time, expected to make intelligent suggestions for improving a piece of prose.

The Result

Students <u>do</u> make intelligent suggestions. Editing motivates them to learn how to evaluate writing, and as they learn to do so and communicate their suggestions to others, they come to understand how writing works.

Editing also frees the students from feeling captive in a required bonehead English class, like so many prisoners serving time. The enthusiasm of students in a night class at San Francisco State University illustrated how editing can affect attitudes. The class consisted of a variety of people: some full-time students, some part-time; some employed, others not; some old, others young. They were alike only in that all were a bit hesitant when they first heard they would be editing classmates' papers. Before long, though, they were arriving promptly on editing nights, eager to begin work immediately–in fact, on one occasion when the teacher was a few minutes late to class, the students started without her. Some students continued editing for 45 minutes after the class was officially over, and others met with their group members outside of class, neither of which was required. In short, these students were experiencing the excitement of knowing enough to teach others about writing, while at the same time learning the most important lesson we have to offer: that they can teach themselves.

Footnotes

[1]A sample Checklist is included with this article. Very often, even at the end of the semester, students cannot work through the entire Checklist in 50 minutes. When that happens, we tell them to finish editing their own papers outside the classroom.

[2]Steps can be added to the editing process. For example, we might require students to write the very first draft of an essay in-class. We can then evaluate this in-class work and return it to the students, who revise it for editing. After their essays are edited, the students will revise them again to hand in for grading. So the students write every essay three times: once in class, once at home for editing, and again at home to hand in for a grade. Also, if the final draft could use more work, even after editing, we require students to rewrite it.

SAMPLE EDITING CHECKLIST

Name of Editor:_____
Name of Writer:_____

Editing Checklist

Instructions: Start by quickly reading through the entire essay in order to understand what it is about. Then read through the following questions, making appropriate notations on the paper you're editing.

THE WHOLE ESSAY

1. What is the thesis statement? (underline it)

   A. Is the thisis statement an opinion or a fact?
   B. Is it clearly written? (Do you know exactly what the writer intends the thesis statement to communicate?)
   C. Briefly note what the thesis predicts the essay will be about.
   D. Does it control the general organization of the paper?
   E. Does it obligate the writer to discuss certain points and not others?

2. Do the sentences in the introductory paragraph logically lead to the thesis statement?

   A. What is their logic? (Remember that some of the ways to get started are to begin with a short narrative, an appropriate quotation, a shocking statistic or bold statement, a detailed description, or a refutation of a commonly held opinion.)
   B. Does it provide all necessary background information?

3. Go through the middle paragraphs and underline the topic sentences of those paragraphs.

   Do the main points of the essay appear in the topic sentences? (Can it be preread?) If not, indicate which sentences should be revised.

4. How does the paper end? (Remember some of the ways to conclude your essay are to present the most important point, state the significance of the subject, call for action or change in attitude, relate an anecdote or personal narrative, give an emotional statement.)

5. Is every part of the paper about what the thesis says it will be about? If not, can the thesis statement be revised so that it tells what the paper is about or must parts of the paper be revised or omitted? (On the essay, indicate any parts of the essay which must be revised or omitted.)

THE MIDDLE PARAGRAPHS

1. Does each paragraph have a clear topic sentence? (Does the topic sentence predict, control, and obligate?) If not, indicate on the essay which ones need to be revised.

2. Do the supporting sentences within the paragraph all relate to the topic sentence of the paragraph? (Make any partinent comments on the essay.)

3. Is the paragraph adequately developed, providing all necessary information? (In other words, has the writer anticipated all significant questions of the reader?) Make comments on the essay.

4. Do any paragraphs contain focus errors? (Make any suggestions for corrections on the essay.)

   A. Are there any inappropriate passives?
   B. Are there any abstract sentence subjects that should be replaced with a personal or concrete subject?

5. Are the paragraphs coherent?

   A. Are there any places where transitions are needed?
   B. Are there any inappropriate shifts in person or verb tense?

THE SENTENCES

1. Are there any choppy passages in the paper? If so, can the sentences be joined by a coordinating or subordinating conjunction? (Be sure to base your decision upon whether the ideas should be given equal importance or whether one idea should be subordinated to another.)

2. Are there any sentences that are over coordinated? If so, what kind of subordinator should be used to connect the ideas?

3. Do any of the sentences have parallel structure errors?

4. Are there any sentences which would be better joined by transforming one sentence into an adjective clause?

5. Could the writer join his ideas by using a verbal phrase?

6. Are there any sentence errors, such as dangling modifiers, predication, run-together sentences?